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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 000635

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS MHIGGINS
OSD/ISA FOR JPOWERS
PACOM FOR FPA HUSO

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SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR URGES ARMY TO USE RESTRAINT
IN THE SOUTH

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

11. (C) In a February 2 meeting with Royal Thai Army (RTA) CINC GEN Sonthi Boonyaratklin, the Ambassador urged Thai forces not to resort to extra judicial means while addressing violence in Southern Thailand. Sonthi assured the Ambassador that his forces would conduct themselves in accordance with international law. Sonthi, who previously served as Deputy Commander of the Southern Border Provinces Peace Building Command, indicated that the RTA was again the lead agency in addressing the South. He told the Ambassador that cooperation among the RTA, Thai Police, and local governments was improving and that RTG officials and other symbols of Thai authority were able to move about in the region with greater safety.

12. (C) Sonthi, a practicing Sunni Muslim from Patumthanee north of Bangkok, agreed with the Ambassador's observation that the Southern violence was driven by ethnic -- not religious -- tension. He noted that the RTG must address core grievances of the local citizens, improve the schools, respect the local culture, and provide economic opportunity if it is to succeed in the South.

13. (C) Sonthi contrasted the ongoing unrest with the Communist insurgency of twenty or thirty years ago. He suggested that an effective military policy would have to separate the supporters of violence -- which he estimated to make up no more than two percent of the population in the three provinces -- from the vast majority of ethnic Malay citizens in the area. He told the Ambassador that the current advocates of violence in the South did not seem to be as well integrated into local society as Communists had been in village life in rural Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s.

14. (C) Echoing remarks made by other senior Thai, Sonthi acknowledged that the security forces were drawing up names of suspected insurgents but made clear that these lists were not going to be used for extra-judicial killings. He said that they were being prepared for law enforcement officials to prosecute criminals within the Thai judicial system.

BIO NOTE

15. (C) Sonthi was relaxed and seemed interested in developing a closer relationship with the Embassy. Sonthi is a protege of Privy Counselor GEN Surayud Chulanont. He served under Surayud as a battalion commander in the early 1990's when Surayud was head of the Special Warfare Command. Sonthi is also a Prep School Classmate of NSC Secretary GEN Winai Phattiyakul. Sonthi has only visited the United States once previously. He has a reputation as an honest professional who has risen to his present position based more on merit rather than political connections. His hobbies include horticulture and electronics. Unlike many Thai officers, he enjoys reading and is interested in world events and foreign affairs. He is not scheduled to retire until September 30, 2007.

BOYCE